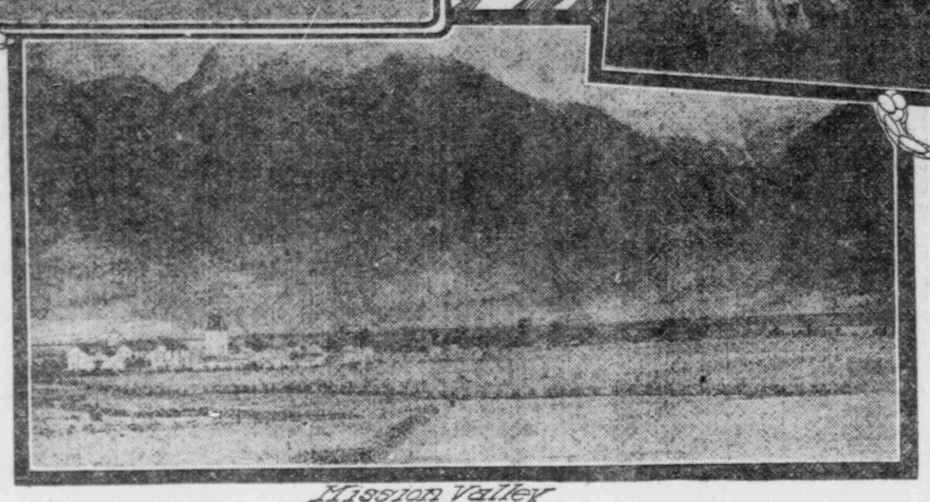
THE ROMANCE OF MISSION VALLEY

By Forbes Lindsay

Indian School, Showing Indian Girls at Work in Sewing Room

In the Open



Mission Valley

THE transcontinental railroad passing through the northwestern corner of Montana carries thousands of passengers every day past the little station of Ravalli. There is nothing about the place to excite more than casual interest—an Indian trading store, an unpretentious hostelry and a few humble houses, backed by rugged hills. If any one alights from the train his destination is probably Mission valley, although he may be ultimately going on to Kalispel.

A steep and winding road brings the traveler to the summit of the Ravalli range, and there a beautiful panorama lies before his eyes. The Mission valley is a deep, narrow notch between two mountain spurs. The Pend d'Oreille sends numerous silvery streams meandering through it. At the upper end stands beautiful Flathead lake, with Kalispel at its head, and nestling under the somber, hoary-headed Mission mountains is peaceful St. Ignatius, which has slumbered through nearly a century in this secluded spot.

The white-walled, red-topped mission buildings stand out against the green and russet of the surrounding crop lands, with the sheeny band of slow-flowing water beyond. The restful, inviting aspect of the scene may be accentuated by the drowsy notes of a bell floating up to the ridge on which the traveler has reined in his horse.

Little change has taker place in the country of the Flatheads since Lewis and Clark, fatigued to the verge of exhaustion, and almost famished, rea... it on their return from the Paci... st. It was a critical stage in the ... unes of the expedition, and had the ...adians proved hostile instead of hospitable, it is quite possible that not a member of the party would have survived to carry home the story of their important explorations, in which case the Oregon territory might never have been added to the map of the United States.

These were the first white men who had ever been seen in that region. Others followed soon afterward, and contact with them awoke in the Indians a curiosity, if not an intelligent desire, to learn more about the white man's religion. They sent a delegation to St. Louis, nearly 3,000 miles distant, begging that a "black robe" might be sent to them. Failing of response, they dispatched another party, and yet two more, on the same errand. At length Father De Smet, of the Order of Jesus, was sent to the Flathead country. De Smet was a fine specimen of the muscular Christian type—a pious priest with the soul of a medieval knight. He was a natural commander of men. In a wider sphere of action he might have won world-wide renown. A comparatively short time sufficed this forceful Jesuit to convert the entire tribe to the Roman Catholic religion, which they have professed ever since.

Indeed, the Flatheads were unusually faithful and obedient children of the church until recent years, when the "boot-leggers" and saloonkeepers on the borders of the reservation began to supply them with contraband whisky. Now drunkenness is common among them and leads to a variety of crimes. During the festival of the annual dance, which is held in July, liquor flows more freely than usual and bloody fights, with occasional fatal consequences, are part of the regular order of things. The writer tested the ease with which whisky is obtained by the Indians. Giving one of them a dollar at the gate of the mission, he found that it took just twenty-three minutes to convert the coin into a bottle of "firewater."

The priests bemoan the backsliding of their flock, but they are almost helpless to better matters. Father Tallman, the active director of the mission, may preach a stirring sermon on a Sunday inveighing against the sin of intemperance. The appeal in their own language to the blanketed men squatting motionless about the floor of the church like so many bronze statues makes a temporary impression at least, and for that day most of them will refrain from indulgence.

The venerable Father Asti, successor to Father De Smet and nominal head of the mission, who is nearing his ninetieth year, promulgates threats and pleas, whilst he sees with sadness the steady deterioration of the Flatheads, amongst whom he has passed a lifetime of earnest endeavor. The Sisters of Charity and the Ursuline nuns, who conduct two schools on the reservation, strive through the women and youths of the tribe to influence the men. It is all of little avail. Father De Smet would have resorted to the practical argument of a stout stick, but the authority of the church has waned and the length of her arm has shrunk. The Indian agent is the only man who can exercise effective control nowadays. He has always had a hard task in the repression of the liquor traffic, and with the opening of the reservations it will be doubly difficult.

For ages the Flatheads lived in this secluded mountain region, having little intercourse with other tribes and making only short excursions from their homes into the nearby buffalo country. They intermarried among themselves and seldom admitted a strange strain of blood. Now they are so mixed that it is said there is not a thoroughbred Flathead on the reservation. Half-breeds are numerous and form the worst element. They account for an excessive proportion of the drinking, immorality and crime.

Great changes are taking place in the country of the Flatheads. Like other reservations, theirs is being thrown open to settlers. Each member of the tribe has received an allotment of land, and, as they are allowed free selection before the whites are admitted, they should be in possession of the choicest tracts. It does not by any means follow that they have generally availed themselves of the opportunity. The Indian is prone to be whimsical and unpractical. His choice of a piece of land may be influenced by sentiment or some condition of trivial consequence. The half-breeds, however, may be counted on to take good care of themselves, even though it be at the expense of fellow-tribesmen.

It is doubtful whether any considerable number of the Indians will work their holdings to advantage. In general they are averse to farming, and the Flatheads have always been disposed to neglect their fertile valleys, preferring to calculate wealth by heads of horses, regardless of quality. The owner of 100 cayuses is deemed richer than if he had the same number of acres under cultivation.

The country is extremely well adapted to stock raising, but nothing effective can be done in that direction until the ill-bred ponies, that are very destructive to the range and impair the quality of the stock, are disposed of. The land is unusually productive and easily tilled. At least one-half of it is sufficiently watered by nature and a project of the government will bring the remainder under irrigation. In all probability the Flatheads will follow the example of the Umatillas and others by leasing their lands to energetic white men and loafing on the proceeds.

Something like $30,000 will be paid to Indian owners of land lying to the north of Ravalli in the acquisition of the new national Bison range which has been authorized by Congress. It is a curious fact that the United States government allowed the largest herd of buffaloes in existence, numbering more than 650, to be shipped out of the United States from this very range a short while before the act of Congress referred to. The animals were bought by the Canadian authorities, but they had hardly reached their destination before our government began to regret its failure to secure them. Canada was asked to sell thirty of the animals, but the request was quite reasonably declined. Then Senator Dixon of Montana put through a bill for the creation of a new buffalo park on the Flathead reservation. The government must now depend upon private owners for the nucleus of the herd.

It is quite generally supposed that the buffaloes of North America were hunted out of existence. Large numbers were needlessly killed by hunters, but the greatest destruction was wrought in a deliberate effort to exterminate the noble beasts. Half a century ago, when the movement of our people across the great plains was beginning to assume considerable proportions, herds of bison were commonly encountered upon the prairies.

The reservation system was then in its infancy, and a great deal of trouble was experienced in keeping the Indians within the boundaries prescribed for them. Parties of them frequently rode forth to the newly settled districts molesting or alarming the white pioneers. When these roving bands were rounded up and returned to their reservations, they invariably advanced the excuse that they had been on a buffalo hunt. It was to deprive them of this temptation and pretext that the soldiers of the frontier posts and the neighboring settlers organized parties that went out with the express purpose of slaughtering as many of the animals as possible. In this way many more bison were slain than ever fell to the rifles of hunters.

It is difficult to understand why the Flatheads are so named. Their craniums are quite normal in shape and there is no evidence that they ever practiced any method of deforming themselves. When the whites first came into contact with them the tribe was remarkable for the fine physique and vigor of its members. While probably never numbering more than 2,500 souls, of whom not more than 600 at any one time could have been active braves, the Flatheads were courageous and warlike. In the old days they had many a bloody encounter with the powerful tribes of Blackfeet and Crows, but, although the Flatheads were generally outnumbered in these fights, they never failed to give a good account of themselves.

They have been consistently friendly to the whites from the time that the footsore and hungry members of the Lewis and Clark expedition sought succor from them. In 1855 they readily entered into a friendly treaty with the United States and induced two other tribes to join them in a cession of what is now western Montana to our government. Twenty years later, when Chief Joseph and his Nez Perces made their famous raid through the Bitter Root valley, the Flatheads were urged to join them. Chief Charlos not only refused to do so, but he assured Chief Joseph that if a white settler in the Flathead country should be injured in person or property by the intruders he would let his warriors loose upon them.

From the earliest period of the migration westward of our people, settlers have located in the Bitter Root valley with the utmost safety and with encouragement from the Indian occupants. Even when the greed of the newcomers for the best lands resulted in the removal of the rightful owners to the reservation farther north, the friendship of the Flatheads was not impaired.

And now the reservation is opened to settlement and one of the irrigation projects of the reclamation service is being carried out upon it. It is a beautiful country of picturesque mountains and broad valleys, through which innumerable streams thread their way. It has been called the Switzerland of America, and the numerous lakes lend themselves to the comparison. The largest of these, the Flathead, is thirty miles in length and from six to eighteen miles in width. Surrounded by mountains and forest and dotted with verdant islands, it is one of the most lovely sheets of water in the world, its neighbors, Lake McDonald and Lake St. Mary's, vying with it in grandeur and beauty.

Experts in mineralogy believe that the Flathead country is destined to become a great mining region. Many specimens of high-grade ore have been taken from its mountain ranges, but the government prohibition against prospecting on the reservation has restrained treasure hunters. The Indians have always actively aided in the enforcement of this order, realizing that with the discovery of extensive gold deposits the land would soon be taken out of their possession.